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## AMOS THE MAN AND THE BOOK IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT CRITICISM.

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THE nineteenth century was essentially a period of criticism, and nowhere was the influence of the critical spirit more keenly felt than in the sphere of biblical study. Many intelligent Christian men were haunted by a suspicion that the "higher criticism" was inconsistent with real reverence and an enemy to living faith. Like all other forms of scientific activity, the "higher criticism," or the critical and literary study of the Sacred Scriptures, can be understood only by those who approach it sympathetically and seek an intelligent view of its methods and aims. Our present task, however, is not to attempt an explanation and defense of these methods, or to consider what has been called the question of "gain and loss" in relation to the Scriptures as a whole, but to confine our attention to one small, important document.

The modern student in dealing with an ancient document considers first its nature as a piece of literature, and asks: Does it possess organic unity, or can it be divided into original and secondary elements? In any endeavor to answer this question, each case must be settled on its own merits. We cannot by the application of general principles save ourselves the trouble of patient, minute investigation. Still one may be allowed to bring forward certain considerations which show that the question is not unfair or absurd. The book of Amos takes origin from the preaching of a man who lived and worked in the middle of the eighth century B. C.; that is, six changeful centuries come in between the beginning of the book and the time when it was reckoned in the strict sense sacred and canonical. During those years the few fragments which represent this man's ministry passed through the hands of many pious men—men who did

not regard it as part of an infallible, sacred book ; men who did not possess our modern idea of literary property ; men whose interest in the religious literature of their nation was rather that of the practical worker than that of the slavish scribe or the scientific student. Under such circumstances it would have been a miracle of the most mechanical kind if the book had come to us in the precise form that left the hand of the first writer. The original message was addressed directly to the needs of the hour in which it had its birth, but it was felt by those who treasured it for future use that it was honored rather than harmed by the additions which adapted it to changed conditions and new needs.

The message of the book was addressed in the first place to northern Israel ; but before a half-century had passed away that kingdom met the fate which Amos prophesied, and it is through the godly men among the people of Judah that the document comes to us. That fact may also account for some of the additions which specialists claim to have discovered in this book. This much, however, is certain, that the book was preserved for us by "the godly kernel" in the kingdom of Judah, and that it shared for a long time in the activity of a living community before it became a fixed part of a sacred canon.

Again, that important event, one of the most important in Jewish history, the captivity in Babylon, marks a real turning-point in the life of the nation, and brings with it a consequent change in the prophetic tone. Before the exile the nation had a natural life that was rich and riotous, and a political life of considerable range and power. The prophets were compelled to speak in a bold, almost fierce, style, and their message was largely one of judgment and doom. After the exile the nation was broken and its political power destroyed ; the ruin that the earlier prophets predicted had come to pass ; the national weakness and insignificance drove men to despair. Then the prophetic voice spoke in this consoling tone : "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God." It is not, then, a very startling or surprising thing, when once we realize the circumstances, if, when the older oracles were collected and adapted to this period, other writings of more hopeful tone were scattered among the

dark prophecies which had secured such a terrible fulfilment. We cannot create any rigid canons of criticism out of these historical facts, but we do well to note that true criticism is not *doctrinaire*, but has, as one of its essential conditions, a sympathetic insight into the real life of those ancient times.

In the fierce light that has beaten upon the ancient Hebrew documents, it was not to be supposed that this small book would escape; for, small as it is in size, it is of great significance for the light that it throws on the development of the higher prophetic teaching. It contains 144 verses, and out of these twenty-eight are regarded as secondary by the most thoroughgoing critics; that means, say, one-fifth of the whole. These consist of eight short passages scattered irregularly throughout the book. It is not proposed to remove these sections from the book or to deny that they have a meaning and value of their own. The comparison of analytic students to the young king who cut the prophetic roll to pieces and cast it into the fire is impertinent as well as misleading. What we mean just now is simply that if, we wish to discover the real Amos and his actual teaching, it will be more satisfactory to confine ourselves to the four-fifths of the book which are accepted by all serious students. These results, if accepted in the most extreme form propounded by any specialist, modify the traditional view of the man and the book mainly by placing a stronger emphasis upon the things that were already emphatic. The bold, outstanding features of the man's teaching are made to stand out with even greater ruggedness and sharper force.

Some have questioned the belief that Amos was a native of Judah, who went northward on a special mission; they think that he was an Israelite who fled to the southern kingdom after he met with persecution in his own land. It is not probable that this view will prevail; but the fact that it is set forth by careful scholars emphasizes a point that was already apparent, namely, that, while Amos is a man with a wide outlook, his preaching is in the main directed against the sins of northern Israel — sins which were undermining the life of an apparently powerful kingdom.

The second point that receives increased emphasis is the fact

that this preacher's denunciations are directed, not against the worship of foreign gods, but rather against an impure worship of Jehovah. It was evident before that the chief stress was there, but advanced criticism makes it clear-cut and absolute. Amos denounces the popular worship of his time so strongly that he seems to have little sympathy with public religious services. To thoughtless men he seemed to assail religion, but what he really attacked was religiosity, shallow religious sentiment manifesting itself in rich ceremonial, but with no power to purify the spirit and control the conduct. His divergence from the popular view is precisely at this point; the people thought that such worship was acceptable to Jehovah and laid him under an obligation to protect them. Amos worked from the thought of the righteousness of God and declared that He must punish the wicked nation the more severely because of its special relation to Him. Jehovah had called the nation out of Egypt, given to it Nazarites, and sent prophets, and this miserable, sensuous, immoral worship was the disappointing result of all his kindly ministry.

In the third place, the advanced view maintains that it was not Amos who placed over against Israel's gloomy prospect the sweet idyllic picture of a Davidic restoration. A well-known French scholar, with his usual flavor of the boulevard, described Amos as "the first intransigent journalist," and one of the most distinguished English critics, in his latest statement on the subject, speaks of him as a "pessimist." This modern phraseology applied to the ancient prophet is apt to mislead us if we take it too seriously. This fierce, thoroughgoing champion of a nobler morality attacked the religious society of his day in the strength of faith, not in the spirit of skepticism. Such mighty faith in a righteous God and in the moral order of the world has in it the promise of progress and the hope of better things. If the man's limitations are strict and his nearest approach to a gospel the cry, "Seek Jehovah, the true righteous Jehovah, and ye shall live," we are not forced to conclude that there is no hope for humanity and that God has utterly failed. Amos was preëminently a preacher. A perfectly rounded system of theology, even such

theology as the times have attained, is not a necessary equipment of the powerful preacher; he must reiterate with painful reiteration the one great lesson that his age needs and that it is so slow to learn.

If we accept this view, we find a plainness and directness about this man Amos. What he sees he sees clearly and expresses sharply. He is not subtle as a thinker; he is not emotional, in the softer sense of that word, though in his own way he is passionate; he is one of those who listened to the voice of God, and yet you would not class him as a mystic. Some find in him a certain hardness and narrowness. We may express this more kindly by saying that he had a limited work to do; he saw it distinctly, and confined himself to his proper task. If he had not a keen appreciation of the æsthetic side of religious life, we may find a partial explanation in the fact that the elaborate ceremonialism of his day was hopelessly entangled in impure associations.

Amos tells us that he speaks because of an inward need, an overpowering spiritual impulse. God makes some men to see deeper and farther than the common crowd, and he claims to be one of these. God does not send judgments without a cause, and there are faithful servants of righteousness who see the divine purpose and understand its meaning; the judging spirit of God presses through into the life of man, and God speaks through living men. This is a cardinal point in the simple creed of Amos. In so far as that needs proof it proves itself. Amos commends himself "to every man's conscience in the sight of God." The proof is not simply in the man's insight and foresight. It may be that a pure, strong man could easily see that such worship was mere trifling, that this boastful prosperity was hollow and doomed to perish in a world where righteousness moves on to final victory; but the man's real power is felt in the positive message which he opposes to the coarse, self-satisfied life of the time.

This message gathers up the noblest teaching of the past and, by fixing men's thoughts on that which is essential, prepares for the future. It grows out of a clear faith in a righteous God, who rules in the heavens and on earth, who manifests himself in

the natural world, and controls the destinies of nations. A power or tendency, not ourselves, making for righteousness expresses very imperfectly this man's thought of God. But in his view God certainly is a tremendous power who will make righteousness to triumph, even if such triumph means the scattering of his own privileged people. From this great thought, not speculatively investigated, but practically applied, springs the whole of what is called the theology of Amos. Some able expositors tell us that in the teaching of this prophet the moral factor overbalances all else, so that his concern is rather with morality than religion. This is a distinction that the prophet himself would hardly have recognized; what we call morality was to him the practical side of religion. Though there was much show of religious worship, he branded the life of the nation as irreligious, because there was so much coarse indulgence, unbridled greed, and boastful violence. Religion to him is the fear of God which cleanses the heart and controls the conduct, making men just because he is righteous, and kind because he has pity for the poor. Religion is so often in danger of being buried in superstition or frozen into cold conventionalities that we do well to recognize the essential nature of this simple, apparently commonplace truth—a truth which lies at the very heart of this man's clear, strong teaching.

The teaching of Amos is a healthy protestantism, not using the word in any narrow sectarian sense. It is the protest of a strong, simple faith against the religion which dishonors God and degrades man. The history of human thought, including the many conflicts in the realm of religion, seems to teach very clearly this great lesson. Skepticism or agnosticism can never contend successfully against superstition. Subtle argument of a negative character and flippant mockery spend themselves in vain against that which, even in crude, coarse forms, has its roots deep down in the human heart. The protest which is to make religion more rational and more moral must spring from a living faith in a righteous God.

This teaching has in it the promise of a more universal religion. It is through his morality, or on the practical side, that he transcends the narrow, national limits. He sees that morality

is not tribal or sectarian. When we read the first chapters of his book, we note how clearly he recognizes the truth that all nations must be measured by the same standard, and that truth-seeking men everywhere may be fairly expected to distinguish between that which is honorable and that which is shameful. This leveling-up seemed to shallow men to be unpatriotic, but it was really a higher patriotism, while it suggested a true universalism and a larger humanitarianism. He did not deny God's special kindness to Israel; but for him that, instead of being a ground for false security, led to a deeper searching of heart, and the application of a severer standard: What manner of men ought we to be who are elected by a righteous God?

There is further the promise of the individual spiritual experience, which is found in growing form in Jeremiah, and which comes to such rich fulfilment in Paul, the apostle of the gentiles. True, the message of Amos was to the community; his fiercest denunciations are flung against the blind leaders of a society that was on the verge of ruin. His was a social gospel seeking to break down caste and to build up a real brotherhood. His attack was against anti-social vices, which destroy true fellowship and dissolve the common bond. But the way in which he states his own experience, and his plea, in the name of God and goodness, for a more human and humane feeling, prepares the way for that value of the individual man without which the highest social life is not possible. In our own day of keen competition and great social inequalities we may well listen to the clear, strong voice which comes to us across the centuries, reminding us that the poor and ignorant are "our own flesh and blood."

This brief review is necessarily imperfect, but it shows that, in the light of the most advanced criticism, if the prophet is no longer a vulgar prodigy, he is still wonderful. We may thank God that there was such a man as Amos in that rude, restless time. He calls forth our reverence by his clear vision, his fearless honesty, his unflinching courage. Not with superstitious awe, but in brotherly love, we claim for him a high place among the noblest servants of the eternal God, who never leaves himself without a witness.